



Revivals And Church History :: early movement: Montanism

early movement: Montanism - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2003/9/6 18:09

Montanus lived in the Phrygian area of Asia Minor at the back end of the 2nd Century AD. He declared that the Holy Spirit was giving new revelations to the church, and named himself and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, as prophets, although there were others. This was referred to as the New Prophecy. In the west, among the Montanist leaders was Proclus, with whom the Roman presbyter Gaius published a Debate.

The emphases of the New Prophecy seem to have been on resisting persecution, fasting, and avoiding remarriage, together with hostility to any compromise with sin. Few of these points were controversial when judged against the ascetism of the next century. Tertullian tells us (in the quote by 'Praedestinatus' and in De Ieiunio) that the Spirit proclaimed no innovation in doctrine, but only gave directions about matters of church discipline, which were coming to be the prerogative of the bishop. It would seem that the Montanists were orthodox in all matters of doctrine.

Responses to this were quite mixed in the church. A reading of the anti-Montanist writers in Eusebius' Church History reveals a great deal of uncertainty among Christians at all levels as to whether the new prophecy was a genuine move of the Spirit or not:

An anonymous anti-Montanist writer, cited by Eusebius, addressed his work to Abercius Marcellus, Bishop of Hieropolis, who died about 200. Maximilla had prophesied continual wars and troubles, but this writer declared that he wrote more than thirteen years after her death, yet no war, general or partial, had taken place, but on the contrary the Christians enjoyed permanent peace through the mercy of God (Eusebius, "Hist. eccl.", V, xvi, 19).

The anonymous opponent of the sect describes the method of prophecy (Eusebius, V, xvii, 2-3): first the prophet appears distraught with terror (*en parekstasei*), then follows quiet (*adeia kai aphobia*, fearlessness); beginning by studied vacancy of thought or passivity of intellect (*ekousios amathia*), he is seized by an uncontrollable madness (*akousios mania psyches*). The prophets did not speak as messengers of God: "Thus saith the Lord," but described themselves as possessed by God and spoke in His Person. "I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete," said Montanus (Didymus, "De Trin.", III, xli); and again: "I am the Lord God omnipotent, who have descended into to man", and "neither an angel, nor an ambassador, but I, the Lord, the Father, am come" (Epiphanius, "HÃ:ir.", xlviii, 11). And Maximilla said: "Hear not me, but hear Christ" (*ibid.*); and: "I am driven off from among the sheep like a wolf ; I am not a wolf, but I am speech, and spirit, and power." This possession by a spirit, which spoke while the prophet was incapable of resisting, is described by the spirit of Montanus: "Behold the man is like a lyre, and I dart like the plectrum. The man sl eeps, and I am awake" (Epiphanius, "HÃ:ir.", xlviii, 4).

It seems on the whole that Montanus had no particular doctrine, and that his prophetesses went further than he did. The extravagances of his sect were after the deaths of all three; but it is difficult to know how far we are to trust our authorities. The anonymous writer admits that he has only an uncertain report for the story that Montanus and Maximilla both hanged themselves, and that Themison was carried into the air by a devil, flung down, and so died. The sect gained much popularity in Asia. It would seem that some Churches were wholly Montanist.

It seems also possible that Montanism in its homeland may have been heretical, but that it masked a genuine move of the Holy Spirit which in other places was entirely orthodox, and would today be regarded as pentecostal. In reality, it is very difficult to tell from the surviving remains, which include some wild rumours of the sort that circulate, albeit in good faith, where there is little real information and no means to check what is going on.

In Africa there was a lot of interest in the new prophecy, and Tertullian came to believe that it was genuine, accordingly mentioning it and defending it in his later works.

Eventually Montanism was condemned by the Bishop of Rome, and the Montanists were pushed out. They lingered on in Asia Minor for some centuries. Later fathers of the church wrote an occasional polemic against them. Tertullian fiercely attacks those who condemned the new prophecy, and in attacking the church authorities as more interested in their own political power in the church than in listening to the Spirit, he foreshadows the protestant reaction to papal claims.

At the end of the 3rd Century AD, a group known as the Tertullianistae may have marked a brief revival in the west of the

s group.